

June 1, 2012

Dear Ward 8 Community:

I would like to thank you, once again, for joining me at the May 23 Ward 8 State of the Schools meeting at Hart Middle School. I was pleased to hear from so many parents and community members and to see such a high level of engagement. We share high expectations for our children and have great plans to improve the schools in Ward 8.

Like you, I appreciated hearing from Ward 8 member of the State Board of Education, Trayon White and Councilman Marion Barry. Both Mr. Barry and Mr. White shared their deep commitment to leading the effort to improve educational opportunities in Ward 8 and I am committed to working with them. I value the feedback and recommendations from the Ward 8 community and will consider the suggestions as we develop plans and make decisions moving forward.

I was happy to hear so many positive suggestions from the community. Many of you expressed that you share my interest in providing students with extended learning opportunities. I think you will be pleased by the options we offer students next school year. You also expressed what was already clear from your participation that evening – that parents want to be engaged in their child’s education. I am committed to providing you with those opportunities. I also heard your reminder that all students deserve a wide range of course offerings from college preparatory courses to career and technical education offerings and foreign language opportunities. Finally, you provided me with the reminder that to be successful, we must address not just the educational needs of students, but also the social and emotional needs. Your positive input is a great inspiration to me and helps ensure that the work we do in our schools addresses the real needs of our students.

Before I respond to a few of the specific questions that were raised at the meeting, I would like to reiterate some of the points I made last Wednesday night.

I am very committed to ensuring that all students have access to challenging and engaging books. This school year, we invested \$1 million to provide complex reading materials in our classrooms because we know that students need such materials to challenge them, spur their interests, and improve their reading skills. School libraries are an important part of any school learning community. Our intention is not to close libraries even in schools where we can no longer fund a librarian. However, looking forward, we do need to adjust our resources and right-size our schools so that schools can have all the amenities they need.

I am also committed to ensuring that students in both the special education and general education population have access to trained staff to address their needs. That is why I increased the number of school-based psychologists by 69 for the upcoming school year.

A number of participants expressed concerns about funding and staffing for Ward 8 schools. Every day, I work to think of ways to ensure that we are offering high quality programs in our schools, programs that will attract and retain students and help our district grow. I hope you will join me in working to increase our student enrollment even as we must make significant changes in our schools.

I was also glad to hear that so many of you are focused on the quality of the principals in our schools. I believe that the human capital in our schools, the teachers, principals and staff, are the most important ingredients in a successful school. I will continue to look at our school leaders carefully to ensure that each school has the leadership it needs for sustained success.

Finally, there were a number of questions raised at the meeting for which I was not able to give a complete answer. Those questions and my answers are below.

Q: Is there a different zero tolerance policy for special education students than general education? Can we clarify discipline policies related to special education students?

A: Federal laws do require that students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are approached slightly differently than those without IEPs. It means that there needs to be a review that takes into account the student's IEP and disability to determine the appropriate response from the school and whether a change in services is required as opposed to a simple suspension or expulsion.

Q: How is Common Core implementation being adapted for students who are several grade levels behind?

A: This year we have worked with teachers in building strategies to help children master text that is on grade level through dedicating blocks of time during the day they can focus on reading (literacy block) that allows them both to read with their peers and independently. This ensures students who need additional supports to get on grade level receive it. Examples of programs in our schools that support literacy development are Scholastic's READ-180 and Wireless Generation's BURST program. Additionally, our materials that teachers use to teach each day are shaped to meet the needs of student who are both below and above grade level. We will continue to support our teachers to ensure they have the necessary skills to teach children with a variety of skills.

Q: In what ways do we adapt DC-CAS administration for special education students?

A: The IEP team for an individual student makes the determinations of the type of accommodation that a student needs for the DC-CAS. Students with significant intellectual impairments may be eligible for an alternative assessment. Students not eligible for the alternative assessment may

have accommodations that do not alter the integrity of the test. These may include the ability to take breaks during tests, special seating or environment, or other such supports.

Q: Is Ballou a summer school location?

A: Yes, Ballou is one of three high school summer school sites. To access all summer school sites and registration information, copy and paste this link into your web browser:

<http://dcps.dc.gov/DCPS/Beyond+the+Classroom/Summer+School>

Q: There have been reports that students who are disciplined at Garfield Elementary School are denied a hot lunch and are only getting turkey sandwiches. Is that true?

A: We have reinforced the policy to not use food as a disciplinary measure. We have confirmed that hot meals are available daily at every school. In addition, our staff has reached out to the Garfield administrators to reinforce the regulations related to this claim and ensure that every child is able to receive a hot lunch. Finally we have re-messaged this policy to our food vendors so they know to raise concerns if anything of this sort should occur in the future.

Q: The 5th grade class at Garfield has more than 30 students. Can we address this?

A: We continue to look at class size as an ongoing priority. This will continue to be addressed at Garfield and each school as we look at our staffing for the new school year 2012-2013.

Q: What facilities improvements, inside and out, are being made at Hart Middle School?

A: Hart is receiving another infusion of facilities capital this summer (2012) and during the summer of 2014. This summer we will be retrofitting space to support the School of One math initiative. The build out will include space reconfigurations, floors, lighting, furnishings, soundproofing, HVAC and other amenities to support the technology rich program.

During the summer of 2014 Hart is slated to receive a "Phase 2" modernization which will focus on completing the school's support spaces. Support spaces include the gymnasium, auditorium, cafeteria, administrative areas/offices and other interior spaces not finished in "Phase 1" which took place in Summer 2011. Phase 2 will also include renovating the grounds around the building.

Q: The 5th grade promotional activity at Turner was reduced to a lunch that parents have to pay for. Can we instead have a traditional promotional activity where students get to walk across the stage?

A: We are working with the leadership at Turner to ensure the promotional activity is one that our students and their families will find memorable and enjoyable. The luncheon will no longer be at cost for parents and is now free.

Q: Why is there no nurse at Patterson?

A: Patterson has had full-time nursing coverage all school year through two nurses who each work at Patterson part time. This changed mid-March when there became a vacancy in one of the nurse positions. This vacancy has recently been filled and the new person is in training. She should begin no later than mid-June.

Thank you again for participating in the State of the Schools meeting. I hope that this will be just the first step in our exchange of ideas as we work together to provide Ward 8 students with the schools they deserve.

Sincerely,

Kaya Henderson
Chancellor